

US tries to avoid Taiwan in S China Sea dispute

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A senior US Department of State official has been jumping through hoops to avoid commenting on Taiwan's territorial claims in the South China Sea.

The incident demonstrates the extreme sensitivity of the situation as US Secretary of State John Kerry continues with his fourth visit to the Asia-Pacific region in the past nine months.

While visiting Vietnam and the Philippines, Kerry pledged an additional US\$32.5 million for ASEAN members to protect their territorial waters and navigational freedom in the South China Sea. He said that US maritime security assistance would now exceed US\$156 million over the next two years.

"Peace and stability in the South China Sea is a top priority for us and for countries in the region," Kerry said during a press conference with Vietnamese Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh in Hanoi on Monday. "We are very concerned by and strongly opposed to coercive and aggressive tactics to advance territorial claims."

After announcing on Nov. 23 that it was establishing an air defense identification zone over the East China Sea, China has claimed a sovereign right to do the same thing over the South China Sea.

During an earlier background briefing — the details of which have been released in Washington — a senior official said that Vietnam and the Philippines, as claimants in the South China Sea, were "faced with significant tensions and the risk of coercive action that could undermine their interest."

Right now, the 10 leaders of ASEAN were meeting in Japan "and undoubtedly comparing notes on the South China Sea and the East China Sea," the official said.

The official said the issue for the US was not who wins the sovereignty argument, but rather how that argument is conducted.

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“Our concern is with behavior and we categorically oppose the threat or the use of force,” he said. “We similarly oppose unilateral actions that aim at advancing a claim through extralegal and non-diplomatic means.”

After saying there were five claimants in the South China Sea, including China, the official was asked if there were not in fact six claimants, including Taiwan.

“Is this a trick question?” asked the official, who cannot be named under the rules of the briefing.

A reporter said: “I’m not asking you to call Taiwan a country. I’m asking you to call it a claimant because I think it is.”

“Yeah, that’s an interesting theological question,” the official replied.

At that point the reporter asked: “Is it or not? Or, are you saying that China’s claim would include Taiwan’s claim, just because of your ‘one China’ policy?”

The official said that Taiwan was not involved in the discussions among claimants.

“They are not involved because the Chinese refuse to recognize them as a country and they can’t get into any of the organizations that would help them,” the reporter said. “I mean, they can’t get into ASEAN, they can’t get into the UN, but they are a claimant.”

The senior official replied: “Let’s just say that there are five countries that have competing claims in the South China Sea.”

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At that point he steered the questioning away from Taiwan and onto other topics being covered during Kerry's trip.

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